GOVT 490.006: Real Data in a Fake News World

Syllabus

Spring 2018

Instructor: Terry L. Clower, Ph.D.  Meeting time: Tuesday 4:30-7:10
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Office hours: By appointment or 3:30-4:30 Tuesdays

Description:

The 2016 presidential election gifted us with a new term in our public discourse on topics great and small: Fake News! Employed initially to discredit unfavorable reporting, “fake news” quickly entered the lexicon of politicians, pundits, residents, and even the media. The spread of fake news websites, social media campaigns, and “yellow” journalism presents ever increasing challenges for the public, researchers, and professionals looking to serve in the public sector. While there is little that an ethical researcher can do to counteract the spread of rumors, innuendo, and falsehoods, we can become skilled at understanding the sources and uses of a wide range of social and economic data that inform the policymaking process. This course is designed to introduce students to data available from public (real) sources covering social and economic topics. Students will gain an understanding of the strengths and limitations of secondary data addressing issues of economic performance, labor force characteristics, demographic data, housing, and information on special populations. The focus will be on data from US and state government agencies; however, international data and widely available private data sources may also be covered. The course will include techniques and tips for effective data searches. Students will be introduced to applied data analytic techniques as tools for describing and understanding economic and human conditions in communities. Through class discussions and presentations, students will explore what the data can tell us about communities, which will require the ability to synthesize the learning students have gained throughout their academic and professional careers. Students will also receive instruction and practice in presenting data, especially to non-technical audiences.

The course will be a blended delivery of in-class presentations, computer work, and instructor-mediated learning.

GOVT 490.006 fulfills all or in part the writing-intensive requirement for the Government and International Politics and Public Administration majors.

Expected outcomes:

1. Students will be able to effectively search and retrieve data from any one of several US and state government agencies such as the Census Bureau, the Bureau of Labor Statistics, the Bureau of Economic Analysis, Department of Housing and Urban Development, Department of
Agriculture, the Federal Reserve System, the Virginia Department of Finance, Virginia Workforce Connection, and international sources such as the World Bank and other agencies/sources.

2. Students will understand how to interpret data from these sources by understanding the methods used to obtain the data, the sources of the data, and have a practical understanding of measurement error and its effect on data accuracy.

3. Students will be able to apply basic descriptive analytic techniques used in regional community and economic research. These include understanding basic descriptive statistics (this is not a stats course) and other techniques used in applied community research.

4. Students will gain, through practice-driven exercises, the ability to write clear, concise messages/briefs/reports that convey the meaning of descriptive data. Demonstrating understanding of the implications of descriptive data requires the student to synthesize their previous learning across the range of university disciplines. Moreover, describing a particular feature of a region’s population, economy, or infrastructure will require multiple data elements synthesized from the catalog of publicly available data.

5. Given a specified geographic area, students will be able to access data and provide a comprehensive description of socio-economic characteristics and trends in a community and understand the strengths and limitations of that description.

Grading:
Grading will be based on in-class writing assignments (20%), two briefing papers (short, technical papers, 20%), class presentations (20%), semester project (25%), and class participation (15%).

Semester Project: The semester project will be a comprehensive economic, social, and demographic description of a student-selected region. The selected region will be used throughout the semester. In many ways, the semester project will be the culmination of all homework assignments. The paper created as part of the Semester Project will include succinct, but illuminating discussions of the presented data. The instructor must approve the selected region.

In-Class writing assignments: At the beginning of most classes, data representing a particular regional characteristic (demographic, economic, other) will be presented. Students will write a 100-word summary of that data and what it may represent for the community in class. Examples will be posted to the class website. Students can think of this as short blog postings. Student submissions will be graded and returned with feedback. There will be 10 of these assignments.

Briefing Papers: At specified intervals during the semester, students will be asked to prepare two (2) 1,500-word (a little over 2 pages using 12 point font and single spacing) briefing papers offering a detailed examination of regional characteristics that have previously been covered in class. Students will have flexibility in choosing which data elements to be the focus areas of their paper, but should be of sufficient breadth to have something to write about. Check with the instructor if you have questions. Examples will be available on the class website. Submissions will be reviewed and returned to students for revision and final submission.
Class Presentations: On a rotating basis, students will prepare a brief PowerPoint presentation showing the data for their region covered in the previous week’s class. The materials used in these presentations may be included in Briefing Papers and the Semester Project.

Class Participation: Class participation includes showing up for class, being prepared for class, and participating in class discussions.

Class Schedule:

**Introduction**


1/30 Descriptive statistics. Geographies.

**Demographics (people)**

2/6 Counting people. Persons, households, income characteristics. Census/ACS

2/13 The way we live. Housing.


2/27 Briefing Paper Preparation: Optional in-class writing lab. Briefing Paper 1 due 11:59 pm


3/13 Spring break


**The Economy and Businesses**


4/10 Briefing Paper Preparation: Optional in-class writing lab. Briefing Paper 2 due 11:59 pm


4/24 Open for student requests. Student presentations. Briefing Paper 2 resubmission due.

5/1 Student presentations.

5/8 Reading Day – No Class

5/15 Written report of semester project due.

**Electronic Devices**

Regarding electronic devices (such as laptops, cell phones, tablets, etc.), please be respectful of your peers and your instructor and do not engage in activities that are unrelated to class. Such disruptions show a lack of professionalism and may affect your participation grade. You will need to have a laptop or tablet with WiFi connectivity. If you do not have such a devise available, please contact the instructor by the end of the first class period.
Schar School Policy on Plagiarism:
The profession of scholarship and the intellectual life of a university as well as the field of public policy inquiry depend fundamentally on a foundation of trust. Thus any act of plagiarism strikes at the heart of the meaning of the university and the purpose of the School of Public Policy. It constitutes a serious breach of professional ethics and it is unacceptable.

Plagiarism is the use of another’s words or ideas presented as one’s own. It includes, among other things, the use of specific words, ideas, or frameworks that are the product of another’s work. Honesty and thoroughness in citing sources is essential to professional accountability and personal responsibility. Appropriate citation is necessary so that arguments, evidence, and claims can be critically examined. The consequences for plagiarizing assignments, tests or other class activities can be severe, up to and including dismissal from the university. Mason is an Honor Code university; please see the Office for Academic Integrity for a full description of the code and the honor committee process. Work in this class will typically submitted in electronic format and the instructor may choose to use electronic tools and other means to screen student submissions for plagiarism and/or academic dishonesty.

Statement on Special Needs of Students:
If you are a student with a disability and you need academic accommodations, please see me and contact the Disability Resource Center (DRC) at 703-993-2474. All academic accommodations must be arranged through the DRC.